

# Entr'acte

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*For the film by René Clair, see Entr'acte (film).*

*Entr'acte* is French for "between the acts". It can have the meaning of a pause between two parts of a stage production, synonymous to intermission, but is more often used to indicate that part of a theatre production that is performed between acts as an *intermezzo* or interlude. Originally *entr'actes* resulted from stage curtains being closed for set or costume changes: to kill time, in order not to halt the action, to make a transition from the mood of one act to that of the next, or to prevent the public from getting noisy. During set changes, the action could be continued in *entr'actes* in front of the closed curtain (only players, no other scenery than the curtain, and a minimum of props). In this sense of taking the action from one part of a large-scale drama to the next by fitting in a part of the story that completes the missing links, an *entr'acte* is similar to an interquel (which is a concept that was formulated much later on however, and indicates an "interlude" of the same kind of resources and magnitude as the parts it joins).

In traditional theatre also incidental music could be used to bridge the 'closed curtain' periods: as well in Ballet, Opera and Drama there is a rich tradition of such musical interludes. The German word for this kind of interludes (*Verwandlungsmusik*) still refers to its original function during changing of the scene. Eventually *entr'actes* (or *intermezzi*) would develop into a separate genre of short theatrical realisations (often with a plot completely independent from the main piece), that could be produced with a minimum of requisites during intermissions of other elaborate theatre pieces (thus distinctly intended to *break* the action with something of a different mood, e.g. comedy or dance; also allowing the chief players of the main piece to have a break). When eventually the idea of being an insert into a greater whole gets looser, interlude sometimes has no other connotation than a "short play".

When the insert was only intended to shift to another mood before returning to the main action, without a change of scene being necessary, authors could revert to a "play in the play" technique, or have some accidental guests in a ballroom perform a dance, etc... In this case the insert would rather be named *divertimento* (in French: *divertissement*) than *entr'acte*. In the French opera tradition of the end of the 17th century and early 18th century (Rameau, etc...) such *divertissements* would become compulsory in the form of an inserted ballet passage, a tradition that continued till well in the 19th century, eventually parodied by Offenbach, e.g. the Cancan ending the *Orphée aux enfers*. By the middle of the 18th century a *divertimento* had become a separate genre of light music too (that could be used for interludes in stage works, but for many of the *divertimenti* composed in the last half of the 18th century the relation to the theatre appears to have been lost, the music in character only having to be a "diversion" in one or another way).

Some famous examples of more or less elaborate and/or independent *Entr'actes* or *Intermezzi* (in some cases eclipsing the theatre productions for which they were originally written):

- *La serva padrona*, a two-act Opera Buffa by Pergolesi, was intended to break the seriousness of his Opera Seria "*Il prigioner superbo*" (1733). Eventually the *Intermezzo* would get more attention than the large-scale work to which it was added (see *querelle des buffons*).
- Mozart shows his mastery in the finale of the first act of *Don Giovanni*, where he mixes the

divertimento-like dancing (accompanied by a small ensemble on the scene), with the actual singing: the characters mingle performing light dances, while actually they're supposed to be chasing each other for murder and rape: so the diversion and the drama become a single multi-layered item.

- A comparable 'filmic' interlude was foreseen in the early 1930s by Alban Berg for his Opera Lulu between the two scenes of the central act. In this case Berg only composed the music and gave a short schematic scenario for a film, that was not yet realised when he died in 1935. The Lulu interlude film, contrary to the previous example, was intended to chain the action between the first half and the second half of the opera. Because of the completely symmetrical build of this opera, the filmic interlude of Lulu is as a manner of speech the axis of the opera.
- Interludes of the divertimento kind can be found in Leoš Janáček's last, and sombre, opera From the House of the Dead (1928): releasing the tension after Skuratov's disheartening tale at the centre of the second act, two "play in play"s (an "opera" and a "pantomime") are executed consecutively by a cast of prisoners, both presentations a farcical variation on the Don Juan theme, and mirroring the religious ceremony divertimento before the Skuratov tale.
- Also the first publicly performed furniture music composed by Erik Satie was premiered as entr'acte music (1920 - the play for which it was written fell in oblivion), with this variation that it was intended as background music to the sound a public would usually produce at intermission time, walking around and talking. To which allegedly the public did *not* obey (they kept silently in their places and listened, trained by a habit of incidental music), much to the frustration of the avant-garde musicians that tried to save their idea by inciting the public to get up, talk, and walk around.
- The film adaptations of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals mostly feature Entr'actes during the intermission that make use of music from the production.

## External links

- Clair and Satie's *Entre'acte* online at Ubuweb (<http://www.ubu.com/film/clair.html>)

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Categories: Compositions by Erik Satie | Silent films | Theatre | Opera terminology

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